

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-11

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C O N F I D E N T I A L RIYADH 398

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: SHUM, ELAB, SA
SUBJECT: NEW SAUDI DECREE AGAINST WOMEN WORKING

REF RIYADH 397

1. ON MAY 22 MINISTRY OF INTERIOR CIRCULATED NEW DECREE UNDER NAME OF PRINCE NAIF, MINISTER OF INTERIOR REITERATING PROHIBITION AGAINST HIRING WOMEN IN ALL BUT FEW NARROW AREAS (TEXT SENT REFTEL). DECREE INSTRUCTS ALL MINISTRIES TO TERMINATE FEMALE EMPLOYEES AND ORDERS MINISTRY OF LABOR TO SEE THAT ALL COMPANIES IN KINGDOM COMPLY WITH NEW ORDER. DECREE EXEMPTS ONLY THOSE WOMEN WHO WORK AS TEACHERS, NURSES, OR SOCIAL WELFARE WORKERS. DECREE FURTHER STATES THAT WOMEN OFFENDERS WILL BE DEPORTED AND LEGAL ACTION (UNSPECIFIED) TAKEN AGAINST THE EMPLOYER.

2. ON MAY 24 USLO DISCUSSED NEW DECREE WITH DEPUTY MINISTER OF INTERIOR, DR. IBRAHIM AL-AWAJI. HE SAID DECREE WAS RESULT OF INCREASED NUMBER OF COMPLAINTS AND PROBLEMS. (WE HEARD MINISTER OF WAQF - RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS - ACTUALLY ADDRESSED LETTER ON SUBJECT TO KING.) EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN IN KINGDOM HAD RISEN DRAMATICALLY IN PAST YEAR. WHILE MINISTRY KNEW FOREIGN COMPANIES HIRED WOMEN, IT WAS NOW VOGUE FOR SAUDIS, EVEN SMALL SAUDI BUSINESSMEN, TO
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HAVE THEIR FEMALE SECRETARY. AL AWAJI POINTED OUT THAT HAVING FEMALE AND MALE EMPLOYEES WORKING SIDE BY SIDE WAS AGAINST THEIR RELIGION. HE SAID THAT WESTERN MEN WERE ACCUSTOMED TO WORKING WITH WOMEN BUT NOT SAUDI MEN. THIS INVARIABLY LED TO INTOLERABLE SITUATIONS. HE DID NOT WANT TO CALL THEM HOUSES OF PROSTITUTION BUT THERE WERE SUCH PROBLEMS. AL AWAJI ALSO NOTED THAT MINISTRY HAD FOUND SOME SAUDI WOMEN WORKING FOR AMERICAN FIRMS. IN GENERAL, HE

SAID SITUATION WAS GETTING OUT OF HAND AND SOMETHING HAD TO BE DONE.

3. REGARDING ENFORCEMENT, AL-AWAJI SAID THAT THERE WAS NO THOUGHT GIVEN TO USING THE POLICE TO ENFORCE THE DECREE. DECREE HAD BEEN SENT TO MINISTER OF LABOR AND ENFORCEMENT WOULD BE UP TO THE MINISTRIES AND THE LABOR BOARDS (INSPECTORS). HE AGREED THE ENFORCEMENT WOULD VERY GREATLY DEPENDING ON INDIVIDUALS IN POSITIONS OF AUTHORITY. IN SOME CASES HE SAID MINISTRY MIGHT JUST IGNORE ENTIRE DECREE. HE THOUGHT WESTERN COMPANIES COULD WEATHER STORM.

4. ON DAY DECREE WAS ISSUED WE KNOW OF TWO AMERICAN COMPANIES WHICH WERE INSTRUCTED BY THEIR MINISTRY TO TERMINATE THEIR FEMALE EMPLOYEES. ONE WAS CALLED IN NEXT DAY BY MINISTER AND TOLD TO IGNORE DECREE. CITIBANK HAS ASKED THEIR FEMALE EMPLOYEES TO REMAIN TEMPORARILY AT HOME PRIMARILY OUT OF FEAR OF THREAT OF DEPORTATION.

5. COMMENT: IT EXTREMELY DIFFICULT TO COMMENT ON WHAT OR HOW FAR SAG WILL GO TO IMPLEMENT NEW DECREE. DEBATE ON ISSUE OF WOMEN WORKING IS HIGHLY EMOTIONAL ONE FOR MOST SAUDIS. IT LIES AT HEART OF SAUDI ARABIA'S CONSERVATIVE WAHHABI ISLAMIC BELIEFS. THE DECREE IS NOT PROBABLY RESULT OF MOUNTING PRESSURE FROM RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND CONSERVATIVE MEMBERS OF ROYAL FAMILY AND GOVERNMENT WHO FEAR STEADY EROSION OF CONSERVATIVE VALUES AND TRADITIONS. ONE SAUDI SUMMED UP POPULAR MALE SAUDI VIEW THAT IF CONFIDENTIAL

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SAG CONTINUED TO ALLOW FOREIGN WOMEN TO WORK, THEY WOULD NEVER BE ABLE TO KEEP SAUDI WOMEN IN THE HOME. THE FACT THAT SOME FEW SAUDI WOMEN HAVE GOTTEN JOBS OUTSIDE THE HOME AND THAT MOST SAUDI COMPANIES NOW VISIBLY EMPLOY WOMEN ON THEIR STAFF WAS PROBABLY TOO MUCH FOR THE CONSERVATIVES TO IGNORE.

6. ON THE OTHER HAND, FORCES OF CHANGE ARE AT WORK. SAME WEEK NEW DECREE WAS ISSUED, 14-MAN COMMITTEE AT MINISTRY OF PLANNING WORKING ON NEW FIVE YEAR PLAN DECIDED TO INCLUDE SECTION ON NECESSITY TO TRAIN AND TO EMPLOY SAUDI WOMEN AS PART OF ATTACK ON SAUDI ARABIA'S SERIOUS LABOR SHORTAGE. DEBATE REPORTEDLY CENTERED NOT ON WHETHER TO INCLUDE IT BUT HOW STRONG TEXT SHOULD BE.

7. THE PENALTIES PRESCRIBED BY THE DECREE FRIGHTEN MOST WORKING WOMEN AND EMPLOYERS. THE FORMER FEAR DEPORTATION; THE LATTER FINES. FEAR IS MOST CERTAINLY A KEY ELEMENT BEHIND DECREE. AS WITH MANY SAUDI DECREES, SAG HOPES THAT FEAR OF ENFORCEMENT WILL BRING ABOUT SOME MODERATION, THUS AN ACCEPTABLE INTERIM SITUATION, WITHOUT EVER HAVING TO ACTUALLY TAKE TO THE BATTLEFIELD. PROBLEM IS THAT SOME CONSERVATIVE LABOR INSPECTORS OR GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS WILL TAKE DECREE SERIOUSLY AND MOVE AGAINST SOME FIRMS. MOST

LIKELY OUTCOME IN OUR MIND IS A PERIOD DURING WHICH MOST FIRMS WILL LIE LOW WHILE CHECKING WITH THEIR BENEFACTORS (MINISTER OR SAUDI PRINCE) TO DETERMINE WHAT THEIR ATTITUDE IS. THEN OVER TIME SITUATION WILL RETURN TO STATUS QUO ANTE WITH SOCIAL DISCUSSIONS IN THE EVENING ABOUT HOW IT IS ILLEGAL FOR WOMEN TO WORK IN SAUDI ARABIA. IN SUMMARY, THE SHORT TERM MAY BE CHAOTIC, BUT THE LONG TERM WILL BRING A MORE TYPICAL BALANCED APPROACH, I.E., A DECREE ON THE BOOKS AND ONLY ISLOLATED INCIDENTS OF HARRASSMENT BY LABOR INSPECTORS. HIRING WOMEN, AFTER ALL, HAS ALWAYS BEEN ILLEGAL IN SAUDI ARABIA.

8. JIDDA AND DHAHRAN WILL WANT TO COMMENT AS ENFORCEMENT OF DECREES HAS VARIED WIDELY FROM PROVINCE TO PROVINCE.

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